# "A vision fair and fortunate": Ideology, Politics, and Selfhood in *Julius Caesar*

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Samuel Johnson declared that in *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare's "adherence to the real story, and to *Roman* manners, seems to have impeded the natural vigour of his genius."[1] Johnson's distinction between Roman manners on the one hand and the natural vigour of Shakespeare's genius on the other has since become a critical commonplace in interpretations of the play, though it has been variously reformulated. Gary Miles has recently identified a conflict between "Shakespeare's distinctive interest in the interior life of his characters" and "the public dimension of his Romans' lives".[2] Edward Pechter has phrased this distinction as a tragic tension between the affairs of the state and the specific interests of the individual. For Pechter, the central dilemma facing Brutus – that is, the choice between honouring his friendship to Caesar and protecting the Republic from the tyrannous threat posed by Caesar's absolutist aspirations – entails a conflict between the unique cares of the individual and the pull of political circumstance. "The tragedy, then, the pity of it, is not that Brutus fails to realise or to recognise his political ambitions," Pechter explains, "but that the total politicisation of experience in Rome blocks access to any area of self free from these ambitions, or allows no possibility for the expression of such a self apart from the murder of Caesar."[3]

These readings of the play reflect a longstanding preoccupation with related themes of social *mores* and natural genius, public obligation and private desire, the state and the individual. They base their arguments in part upon the stylized formality of the play's language and characters, who comport themselves at all times as though they were in public, to the detriment of any private or more intimate conceptions of selfhood; even in soliloquy Brutus and Antony frequently sound as though they are participants in an oratorical debate. But if such readings appear intuitively correct, they are complicated by the fact that, while the characters' inclinations towards

public formality may seem alien to us, it is entirely natural to them. In apparent contradistinction to Pechter's identification of a tension in the play between the state and the interests of the individual, the major characters, far from being encumbered by public life, seem, as patricians, to benefit from their participation in politics and indeed to define themselves as individuals through their political activity. Brutus himself willingly embraces his role in politics, and increasingly seems to relish his position as leader of the republican conspiracy as the play proceeds. To this extent, it appears that the oppositional relationship between politics and selfhood in the play can be overstated.

Shakespeare's Romans regard themselves first and foremost as Romans, committed to defending Rome against all enemies, including tyrants and traitors. Politics as such plays a central role in how the characters perceive themselves and each other, and it cannot easily be excluded from any personal or private aspect of their identities. This raises the question: does politics compromise, constrain, and annul personal identity in the play, or empower and liberate it? In answering this question, a parallel to Shakespeare's Renaissance treatment of ancient Rome may be found in the ideas of the twentieth-century Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. Throughout his writings, particularly from the mid-1960s onwards, Althusser was preoccupied with elucidating the structures that rendered individuals pliable members of the state even as they continued to behave under the assumption that they are free agents. Althusser argued that political consent in modern capitalist societies is won by instilling into individuals a set of dominant cultural values that they could subsequently take up and recognize as their own. In similar fashion, the characters in *Julius Caesar* opine and act upon normative cultural values that they interpret as their own. They define themselves in terms of their Romanness, and view their public obligations and private interests as inseparable elements of their self-identities.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the dynamic between politics and selfhood as it is depicted in *Julius Caesar*, by reading it in relation to Althusser's ideas – in particular, his conception of ideology. A correspondence between the play and Althusser's understanding of ideology has previously been advanced by Coppélia Kahn. In her book *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors,*

*Wounds and Women*, Kahn suggests that in addition to the external factors motivating Caesar's assassination, the conspirators are inspired by an image of themselves as heroic defenders of the Republic. Writing about the moment in which Cassius first attempts to seduce Brutus into conspiracy, she argues that Cassius makes an "appeal to the Republic" and Brutus proclaims a personal "commitment to the general good" which "can be read as ideological in Althusser's sense: an imaginary conception of their real relation to the Roman state".[4] My aim is to elaborate on Kahn's application of Althusser's ideas to Julius Caesar, while continuing to appraise those ideas critically, testing them and the assumptions about politics and selfhood implicit in the play against each other, and noting their divergences as well as similarities. For it is only by considering their differences that we can bring to sharp relief their shared view of the individual as a politically constrained entity, and their common understanding that people construe themselves in terms of their affiliation with the state as part of a process by which they inadvertently surrender their personal freedom to the state.

Let us begin by examining Althusser's ideas. In his essay "Marxism and Humanism" (1964), Althusser made a bold claim about Marxism. He wrote that:

> Marx rejected the problematic of the earlier philosopher and adopted a new problematic in one and the same act. The earlier idealist ('bourgeois') philosophy depended in all its domains and arguments (its 'theory of knowledge', its conception of history, its political economy, its ethics, its aesthetics, etc.) on a problematic of *human nature* (or the essence of man). For centuries, this problematic had been transparency itself, and no one had thought of questioning it even in its internal modifications.[5]

In the later writings of Marx, Althusser detected a radical shift from traditional humanist celebrations of the individual towards a more scientific preoccupation with class structures and modes of production – that is to say, with the deep institutional structures and societal mechanisms that circumscribed all forms of personal agency and will. To appreciate the full implications of this shift, we need to understand what it was that Marx, in Althusser's view, was rejecting in humanist appraisals of the individual.

Humanism broadly speaking extols the individual as a self-sufficient plenitude, a rational, free-thinking being who engages the world but is not crucially shaped by it. This individual the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt had identified in *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) as originating in the Renaissance:

> In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness – that which was turned within as that which was turned without – lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation – only as a general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognised himself as such.[6]

If in the Middle Ages, a person was supposedly discernible only as a unit of an encompassing system – as a "member of a race, people, party, family or corporation" – in the Renaissance, Burckhardt argued, we see the makings of a new and untrammelled individualism. According to this argument, the modern individual was forged in the manifold political and theological upheavals that beset Early Modern Europe, and consequently was set free from the worldly and material pressures that fomented his existence. "Man" was now imbued with a robust, world-conquering confidence in his own spirit, or essence. Against this claim, however, Althusser argued that the image of the modern individual as an indomitable, unconstrained, unified subject was a myth, and he suggested that the exposure of such myths as myths formed a definitive role in the ongoing project initiated by Marx.

For Althusser, the continuing relevance of Marxism in the twentieth century hinged upon this decisive theoretical break from humanism. If not for this, Marx's formulations, especially his expectation of a full-scale workers' revolution, were liable to appear embarrassingly outmoded and anachronistic. Althusser's own ideas can be understood within the context

of his particular status as a Marxist living in the twentieth century and seeking to understand why the revolution outlined by Marx a century before had failed to take place. In his view the revolution failed to eventuate because modern capitalist societies had found ways to forestall not only the prospect of revolution, but also the desire for it. Simply put, the revolution failed to arise because it never occurred to workers to revolt; they never thought to rise up in solidarity and contest the conditions of their existence, despite the indisputable fact that massive inequalities continue to obtain in modern capitalist societies, inequalities that belie the manner in which such societies manage to reproduce the status quo from generation to generation. Why would the poor and the disadvantaged accept their lot without complaint? What prevented them from recognizing revolution as a valid alternative, not only to their present state of affairs, but also to generations of institutionalized oppression? Althusser concluded that underlying this state of affairs was the existence of a certain kind of communal conformity to authority, a kind of obedience that could be secured without need for continuous, overt coercion. This conformity was especially insidious because it had been achieved covertly, stealthily, and indirectly – that is, through the work of ideology.

Althusser argued that individuals were implanted with an ideology that rendered them pliable and obedient to the state. It is useful to contrast his conception of ideology to the notion of the independent, rational individual extolled by humanists. If the humanist subject is scrupulously aware of his own capabilities and importance, ideology, by contrast, is "profoundly *unconscious*".[7] Whereas the humanist subject is grounded in his essential autonomy – his putative difference from the world that he inhabits and shapes to his will – ideology functions by instilling in people an idealized projection of an essentially harmonious, mutually profitable relationship between the individual and the state. It is an "expression of the relation between men and their 'world'."[8] Although this relation seems real, it is nonetheless a neat fiction designed to secure the individual's adherence to the state as a whole: "In ideology the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses a will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality."[9] For Althusser, ideology is anathema to the notion of rational consciousness idealised in humanist discourses. Thus dethroned, the

humanist subject was replaced in Althusser's schema by an account of the individual as a politically constrained entity, entrapped in the ideological illusion of his benign relationship with the state.

From where, and under what circumstances, did people first encounter and learn to accept this ideological image of their relation to the state? Althusser attended to these questions in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" (1969). Here his principal aim was to expose the societal mechanisms that caused people to become obedient members of society. He acknowledged that there are overt resources for the regulation of the *status quo* in society, which he termed Repressive State Apparatuses. These include the government, the law courts, the military, the prison system and the police. A repressive state apparatus typically "'functions by violence' – at least ultimately (since repression, e.g. administrative repression, may take non-physical forms)."[10] Such institutions therefore did not in themselves explain why people continued to subscribe to the dominant values of society from generation to generation. Althusser consequently turned to consider more covert means for enforcing the dominant values of society. He lighted upon certain organising structures such as churches, schools, the family, trade-unions, and the media – all of which, he believed, could reliably be expected to advocate obedience to authority. The cultural function of Ideological State Apparatuses, he argued, was simply to instil in people an ideology, which Althusser concisely summarized in this essay as "*the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.*"[11]

Ideological state apparatuses operate not merely by enforcing the passive reception of the *status quo*, but by conditioning members of society to accept the *status quo* and their own membership in it as integral to their personal happiness. People are born into a pervasive atmosphere of obedience that is specifically evoked and maintained by ideological state apparatuses. In Althusser's view, ideological state apparatuses encourage people to make sense of themselves on the terms dictated by the state. For this aspect of his argument, he renovated ths classic Marxist definition of ideology as "false consciousness" and fused it together with insights afforded by Lacanian psychoanalysis into the Imaginary – that is, the preverbal realm through

which people become aware of their own properties and dimensions, as when a child recognises her reflection in the mirror. He believed that, in the same manner, people come to recognise themselves as conservative members of the *status quo* after being imbued with an ideological image of their own containment within society. He called the process by which people absorb and accept this ideology "interpellation", delivering the following formulation as a general description of the relation of ideology to interpellation: "*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*."[12]

Althusser's ideas, and the theoretical assumptions that surround them, can be and have been criticized on a number of counts. In his zealous efforts to pull away, even further than Marx, from the humanist subject, and to outline in broad strokes the covert ideological structures that socialize human experience, he makes a number of generalizations that are open to debate. Like Burckhardt's use of terms such as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Althusser's understanding of human nature, the individual, and the state can seem at times hazily constructed and ambiguous. Late in life Burckhardt in fact retracted his claim that a proto-humanist conception of the individual was invented in the Renaissance. But Althusser continued to acknowledge, and critique, this conception as though it were a fixed and stable property. Also contentious is his identification of a clean break in Marx's late writings from the humanist treatment of personal autonomy he had espoused earlier. In fact, the notion of personal freedom arguably continues to linger in Marxism, and more generally in the antihumanist tradition it inhabits.

These reservations notwithstanding, Althusser's ideas occupy an important place in Marxist literature, and they have also exerted a notable influence on modern literary studies. What sustains this interest in them is also what sustains the connection between them and *Julius Caesar*: that is, their elucidation of the relation between politics and selfhood, and their account of how ideology not only impinges upon but also shapes individual self-awareness. Indeed, if we disregard this, Shakespeare's play and Althusser's writings may seem to derive from fundamentally incompatible assumptions. While Althusser was specifically interested in elucidating the structures that dictate obedience to authority in stable modern capitalist societies, Shakespeare evokes the tumultuous and unstable period of the late Roman Republic. Althusser

sought to explain why workers refrained from revolution; Shakespeare's play depicts a populace who enact mob violence. Late republican politics contains a line of patricians who gradually supersede each other in the affections of the populace, from Pompey, to Caesar, to Brutus, to Antony and Octavius.

In the opening scene, the Pompeyan tribunes Murellus and Flavius acknowledge Rome's political instability when they castigate two commoners for participating in the celebrations for Caesar's victory over Pompey. "O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome, / Knew you not Pompey?" Murellus asks.[13] The general populace, he ruefully observes, had previously assembled "To see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome" (1.1.41). Now, though, they "strew flowers" for Caesar as "he comes in triumph over Pompey's blood" (1.1.49, 50). After chiding the commoners in this way for the fickleness of the lower classes in general, the tribunes watch as the two men scurry off. "See where their basest metal be not moved," Flavius remarks (1.1.60). In this punning statement, the commoners' "basest metal", or dubious character, is made to seem as malleable as the base metals on which they work as part of their trades. By extension, just as the commoners transform base metals into viable commodities, so, Flavius perceives, the tribunes' role is to shape the base mettle of their fellow Romans into a more refined, Pompeyan constitution. But nothing that occurs onstage suggests that the tribunes' reproaches have been successful, and indeed nothing that they can say will bring Pompey back from the grave. The tribunes are trying to instil in the people an allegiance to Pompeyism at a time when such loyalty has become irrelevant. Pompey is dead, and consequently the people have shifted their support to Caesar. The tribunes fail to demonstrate how a renewed loyalty to Pompeyism would benefit the people in the present. Interested only in castigating them for their disloyalty to Pompey, Murellus and Flavius neglect to prove that the Pompeyist enterprise remains pertinent to the people's interests.

As Murellus and Flavius unwittingly demonstrate, in Rome it is not enough to try to win over the populace to one's views by chiding them into conformity. Something more is required, something that is based, not on a formal political argument, or on a discussion of justice and its correlates, but

rather something that serves to win people's active consent by enjoining them to recognise the principles being conveyed to them as their own: that is, in Althusser's terms, an ideology. In *Julius Caesar*, conformity to a political cause of one kind or another – whether it be Pompeyism, Caesarism, or the republicanism modelled by the conspirators – is always connected to a fixed ideology that enables individuals to perceive themselves in terms that reflect their participation in the political sphere. I want to turn now to a successful example of persuasion in the play which, I suggest, achieves its aim precisely by instilling into the object of persuasion an ideology. That example is Cassius's seduction of Brutus into the republican conspiracy.

When Cassius first attempts to win Brutus to the conspiracy, his strategy of persuasion has less to do with a discussion of the political issues surrounding his opposition to Caesar, as we might expect, than with instilling in his friend a self-image that will be amenable to the role of conspirator. From the first, Cassius makes it clear that the focus of his rhetoric is Brutus:

> CASSIUS: Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?
> BRUTUS: No, Cassius, for the eye sees not itself
> But by reflection, by some other things.
> CASSIUS: 'Tis just,
> And it is very much lamented, Brutus,
> That you have no such mirrors as will turn
> Your hidden worthiness into your eye,
> That you might see your shadow. (1.2.51-58)

Just as the eye "sees not itself" without some alternative means of reflection, so Brutus cannot see his "hidden worthiness" without another person to explicate it to him. Like a schoolmaster giving instruction to a pupil, Cassius raises the topic of self-knowledge to Brutus. His opening rhetorical gambit is itself reminiscent of the Socratic method: he directs the conversation by asking a specific question and then elaborating upon the answer with his own observations. Cassius is providing an education of sorts, by preparing Brutus for his seduction into the conspiracy.

Althusser included schools in his list of institutions whose cultural function is to implant in people an ideological image of themselves as

obedient members of the state. Similarly, the purpose of Cassius's education of Brutus is to implant in Brutus an image of himself in relation to the state. By invoking the actions of a legendary Roman who also happens to be Brutus's ancestor:

> There was a Brutus once that would have brooked
> Th'eternal devil to keep his state in Rome
> As easily as a king. (1.2.159-61)

The efforts of Lucius Junius Brutus to expel the despotic Tarquins from Rome led to the founding of the Republic. By raising this man's actions, Cassius posits a precedent for Brutus to aspire to and follow. Brutus's "hidden worthiness", he suggests, lies in his emulation of this model. For, Cassius artfully implies, Marcus Junius Brutus too must now defend the common good in Rome by rising up against a tyrant – Caesar. But Caesar is not mentioned directly here. The unremitting focus on Brutus serves to obfuscate the central political question that lies at the heart of the conspiracy, the question of whether or not Caesar is in fact a prospective tyrant. Instead of raising this question, Cassius emphasizes a pristine heroic image that appeals directly to Brutus's perceived obligations to Rome.

Cassius endows Brutus, in other words, with the ideology of an aspiring republican hero. This ideology fills the lack of any evidence Cassius might have mustered in support of the conspirators' arguments about Caesar's putative tyranny. As Gayle Greene points out, "the real grounds of [his] appeal are not the sort he can state: they are to Brutus's vanity and image of himself as a noble Roman, and are inarticulated because inadmissible".[14] Brutus, for his part, is quick to signal his understanding of the appeal that has been put to him. "What you work me to, I have some aim," he insists (1.2.163), "What you have said / I will consider" (1.2.167-68). "I have some aim" and "I will consider" imply a sense of analytical distance. And yet, when Brutus returns home, ostensibly to ponder further Cassius' argument, his ruminations are noticeably uncritical. Indeed, rather than weigh up the merits of his friend's appeal, he faithfully copies Cassius' methods. Like Cassius, he deploys philosophical abstractions that confer upon his musings the illusion of authority. "Th'abuse of greatness is when it disjoins / Remorse from power,"

he loftily declares (2.1.18-19). But, realizing that this generalization does not apply to Caesar – "and to speak truth of Caesar, / I have not known when his affections swayed / More than his reason" (2.1.19-21) – he proceeds to "Fashion" a plausible scenario to convince himself (2.1.30).

Brutus demonstrates an unthinking acceptance of the ideology Cassius had set out for him. His inability to think critically about his situation complies with Althusser's observation that ideology is always "profoundly *unconscious*". Just as Cassius had used figurative imagery to suggest an increase in Caesar's power and stature, so Brutus now describes him as a "serpent's egg / (Which, hatched, would as his kind grow mischievous)" (2.1.33). Further elaborating Brutus's uncritical acceptance of Cassius's claim is his invocation of his ancestors. "My ancestors did from the streets of Rome / The Tarquin drive when he was called a king" (2.1.53-54). The details that follow indicate that Brutus has resolved to join the conspiracy. He immerses himself in the role of republican defender that Cassius had suggested to him, trying on his identity, as it were, to see how it fits:

> Am I entreated
> To speak and strike? O Rome, I make thee promise,
> If the redress will follow, thou receivest
> Thy full petition at the hand of Brutus. (2.1.55-58)

Once again, he implies, a Brutus will protect Rome.

Why has Brutus accepted Cassius' claims so uncritically? One reason is fatigue. His exhaustion prevents him from thinking clearly and dulls his capacity to analyse the situation properly. "Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar," he insists, "I have not slept" (2.1.61-62). But also, as Sharon O'Dair observes, "In Brutus ... Cassius finds a willing ear who readily understands his innuendo and who senses, if somewhat vaguely, something fundamental besides power or even the Republic is at stake as Caesar moves closer to being crowned emperor".[15] Cassius excites Brutus's natural inclination towards self-analysis and provides him with a conceptual framework to redress his recent, half-formed feelings of discomfort over Caesar's increasing political influence:

> Between the acting of a dreadful thing
> And the first motion, all the interim is
> Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.
> The genius and the mortal instruments
> Are then in counsel, and the state of man,
> Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
> The nature of an insurrection. (2.1.63-69)

These lines indicate that Brutus identifies not only with his famous ancestor, but with the Roman state. While Shakespeare's own ideological formation under the Tudor monarchy causes him to figure the Roman state as a "kingdom", the metaphor only makes sense if it is understood that Brutus is specifically comparing himself to the Roman Republic. Brutus thinks that by murdering Caesar, peace will be brought to himself as well as to the Republic. In this fashion, he weds himself to the state that he vows to protect by portraying himself in terms that clearly designate him not only as its defender but as its soulmate. Describing himself thus as a microcosm of the Republic, he internalizes the ideology with which Cassius presented him, and consolidates the process by which he can now recognise that ideology as his own. The soliloquy as such is a model example of interpellation, in which Brutus constitutes himself as a loyal subject of the Republic, and demonstrates himself to be from this point onwards unable to perceive his own identity except in terms that reflect his deep empathetic affiliation with the state.

Brutus absorbs the republican ideology into his own identity and then enacts it of his own volition. At the heart of this ideology is the impulse to cling to the traditional values of the Republic, and to defend those values by containing the disruptive threat of Caesar. But in this respect, the conspirators' ideology is problematic. While Cassius may convince Brutus – and while Brutus may convince himself – that the role of the conspirator is to adhere to and preserve the Republic's ideals, the act of murder he now proposes would itself seem to constitute an instance of transgression. Although the conspirators assume that Caesar's death will restore order to the embattled Republic, his assassination could be construed as a breach of the communal code of conduct that prevents Roman from killing Roman. Brutus himself seems to sense that the potential implications of the murder could destabi-

lize the whole enterprise by exposing the conspirators as hypocrites – as men who protect the communal laws of the Republic from Caesar's absolutism by taking those laws into their own hands. He laments that Caesar's aspirations cannot be tamed without killing the aspirant: "O, that we then could come by Caesar's spirit / And not dismember Caesar!" (2.1.169-70). Unable to find a way to separate the spirit from the body, however, he proceeds to transfigure the body through imagery that is notably bereft of blood: "Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods, / Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds" (2.1.173-74). In this way, Caesar's bleeding corpse is transformed into a form of nourishment even before he has been murdered, and the assassination is endowed with the status of a pious act of sacrifice to the gods.

Brutus uses figurative language to contain the transgressive spectacle of Caesar's body; he renders it acceptable, making it comply with the republican ideals of the conspiracy. But Brutus is not the only person who presses figurative language into the service of the conspirators' ideology of containment. After Caesar has described Calpurnia's dream – an ominous dream that initially convinces Caesar not to attend the Senate – Decius, another conspirator, seeks to revise it as a "vision fair and fortunate" (2.2.84):

> Your statue spouting blood in many pipes,
> In which so many smiling Romans bathed,
> Signifies that from you great Rome shall suck
> Reviving blood, and that great men shall press
> For tinctures, stains, relics, and cognisance. (2.2.85-89)

In the first instance, Decius' words are calculated to flatter Caesar by conveying, through language, a favourable, royalist image of Caesar's absolutist aspirations. Here Caesar is described as the crucial component of a body politic. Marmoreal yet vital, he allows his fellow Romans to suck his "Reviving blood" even as he hovers over them with monumental impressiveness. Coppélia Kahn has noted how Caesar in this image appears to occupy multiple gendered positions.[16] He is at once a nurturing mother and a paternal guardian watching over the people. At the same time, though, Decius' bizarre interpretation of the dream is laden with irony, and it incorporates Caesar's personal ambitions into an image that paradoxically

accords with the conspirators' impetus to contain them. If Brutus had earlier expressed his hope that the assassination would be a bloodless sacrifice, Decius now aestheticizes Caesar's bleeding body in such a way that his "Reviving blood" becomes a site of stable regulation.

In this manner, the conspirators enact through language what they seek to do through physical action: to contain Caesar. But when they murder him in the Capitol, the assassination is far removed from the bloodless spectacle that they had evoked beforehand. Even after they have repeatedly stabbed him, they insist on according the event a sublime grandeur that belies the pathetic spectacle of Caesar's mutilated corpse. "Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!" Cinna declares, echoing the conspirators' conviction that Caesar's aspirations presented them with two alternatives – either to let them transgress liberty and freedom, or to contain his tyrannical ambitions (3.1.77). Cassius displays an even more heightened sense of the momentousness of the event:

> How many ages hence
> Shall this our lofty scene be acted over.
> In states unborn and accents yet unknown! (3.1.111-13)

Cassius contains the bloody assassination in a historical narrative in which the conspirators' action is venerated and re-enacted onstage. A fissure thus opens up between the ideological and the actual dimensions of the event, rendering suspect the very motives upon which the conspirators have based their decision to murder Caesar. Caesar was never a tyrant, as Cinna suggests; and Cassius cannot be certain that history will confer posterity upon the conspirators, as he would like. The scene asserts the tragic blindness of the conspirators by demonstrating how little they know, either of the present or the future, despite their emphatic, ideologically charged declarations.

If we accept Althusser's claim that all ideologies are imaginary, then the fissure between the ideological and the actual in the conspirators' language is only one of many telling signs that their appraisal of the assassination is neither the sole nor the definitive account of it. Events in the aftermath of Caesar's murder further destabilize the conspirators' political and ideological

convictions. Though the conspirators had predicted that order would be maintained in the Republic as a result of the assassination, Mark Antony espouses an opposing view. Standing over Caesar's body, he declares,

> Over thy wounds now do I prophesy –
> Which like dumb mouths do ope their ruby lips
> To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue –
> A curse shall light upon the limbs of men:
> Domestic fury and fierce civil strife
> Shall cumber all the parts of Italy;
> Blood and destruction shall be so in use,
> And dreadful objects so familiar,
> That mothers shall but smile when they behold
> Their infants quartered with the hands of war,
> All pity choked with customs of fell deeds;
> And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
> With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
> Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
> Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war,
> That this foul deed shall smell above the earth
> With carrion men, groaning for burial. (3.1.259-75)

Antony's rhetoric eerily echoes and subverts several of the claims made earlier by the conspirators. Brutus had suggested that insurrection would be overcome once Caesar was murdered; here Caesar's very wounds speak out the fact that "Domestic fury and fierce civil strife / Shall cumber all the parts of Italy." Decius had envisaged Caesar as a motherly figure allowing his fellow Romans to feed off his blood; Antony imagines that the conspirators' "mothers shall but smile when they behold / Their infants quartered with the hands of war". Brutus had lamented that he could not separate Caesar's spirit and body; Antony describes "Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge", dislodged from the body but still persevering to bring havoc to the conspirators. Antony's prophesy of ruin and destruction in effect discloses a competing strategy of subversion to the conspirators' ideology of containment. He perceives himself as the mediator of Caesar's avenging spirit, seeking to dismantle, undermine and overturn the brief moment of peace that the conspirators experience after they have committed the assassination.

This perception is nowhere more apparent than in the funeral orations of Brutus and Antony. The orations provide Brutus and Antony with the opportunity to persuade the general populace of the merits of their respective ideologies. But their contesting perspectives on Caesar's assassination also serve to undermine the claims to authority of each. Brutus reiterates the argument, by now familiar, that the conspirators killed Caesar in order to free the Roman people from bondage: "Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men?" (3.2.20-21). He explains that he derived no personal pleasure in murdering his friend, and that he sought merely to contain Caesar's ambitions: "There is tears for his love, joy for his fortune, honour for his valour, and death for his ambitions" (3.2.24-25). In Brutus's rhetoric, everything is neatly contained within easily definable categories. Words are fixed, values are fixed, and Caesar's murder is depicted as the result of the conspirators' efforts to maintain order in Rome. By contrast, Antony's rhetoric is characterized by subversion. He dismantles Brutus's argument, bringing into question the validity of its precepts in relation to the actual circumstances. Caesar, he recalls, "brought many captives home to Rome, / Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill; / Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?" (3.2.80-82). In this manner, he invokes words that Brutus had used ("ambitions") and redeploys them in ironic contexts. He displays the instability of ideology, its incapacity to lie still, by turning Brutus's words back onto themselves. Nothing Antony says is a reliable index of his true beliefs. He revels in insincerity, as, for example, when he proclaims his amateurship as a rhetorician:

> I am no orator as Brutus is,
> But – as you know me all – a plain blunt man
> That love my friend; and that they know full well
> That gave me public leave to speak of him. (3.2.207-10)

With the consummate skill of the orator he claims not to be, he fashions an image of sincerity that is wilfully insincere. Plain, unadorned speech, seemingly a measure of the speaker's own plainness, is deliberately pressed into the service of deception. By referring to himself as "a plain blunt man" when he manifestly is not, Antony threatens to expose the artificiality of his rhetoric, its disingenuousness. But this too is a part of the effect that he has

manipulated: he evokes a conception of the world in which nothing is as it seems, and everything and everyone – even Brutus and Antony – is cause for suspicion.

Though Brutus and Antony are ostensibly engaged in offering justifications for their positions on Caesar's murder, their concerns are in fact somewhat more pragmatic; they are each desperately trying to win the crowd's trust, by interpellating the populace into their respective ideologies. Brutus attempts to keep the crowds calm, in effect, to contain them by making them recognize themselves as liberated men who have benefited from the conspirators' courageous actions; Antony exhorts the crowds to see themselves as victims of endless subversion living in a world in which trust is impossible. In neither Brutus's nor Antony's orations is definitive evidence provided of Caesar's true nature. Indeed, by offering contradictory views of Caesar, they in effect cancel out each other's statements. In this state of confusion, it is Antony who emerges victorious, and the mobs duly interpellate his ideology of subversion, by taking to the streets and rioting. Antony had severed words from their original meanings in his oration; the mobs, interested only in the word, now hunt down Cinna the poet because he happens to share the same name as one of the conspirators:

> CINNA: Truly, my name is Cinna.
> FIRST PLEBEIAN: Tear him to pieces, he's a conspirator.
> CINNA: I am Cinna the poet, I am Cinna the poet.
> FOURTH PLEBEIAN: Tear him for his bad verses, tear him for his bad verses. (3.3.25-28)

The fissure between the conspirators' language and the reality of their situation now becomes a definite rupture. Although they aestheticized the violence of Caesar's assassination as a sacrifice to the gods, or as a poetic tribute to liberty, they do not even attempt to explain away this violence which they did not commit. Such violence does not in any case reconcile with their earlier claims that Caesar's death would prevent further disarray in Rome. The second half of the play exposes the limitations of the conspirators' ideological assumptions. In their eagerness to believe that, by killing Caesar, the Republic would be preserved, they failed to consider or make provision

for the events in the aftermath of his murder. Primarily concerned with containing Caesar, they ignored the potential consequences of their actions and the turmoil that could ensue as a result of their own actions. Convinced by their own rhetoric into thinking that by murdering Caesar they were simply containing the threat he posed to the Republic, they did not foresee how Caesar's supporters could impose an alternative interpretation onto their actions, one in which the conspirators are construed as the transgressors.

Ostracized by the Roman populace, and preparing to take up positions at Philippi, the conspirators are forced to confront the fact that they are not the defenders of the Republic, and that their efforts have not served to contain the disruptive threat to the state, as they had believed. For Cassius, this revelation is bound up with his general feeling that all of his prior assumptions about the world and himself are dissolving. When the reality of the world, in the shape of Fate, encroaches upon him, he describes its effect upon him in terms of a dissolution of knowledge and of the self:

> You know that I held Epicurus strong
> And his opinion. Now I change my mind
> And partly credit things that do presage. (5.1.76-78)

As Stephen Greenblatt writes of this passage, "Everything Epicurus stood for – radical materialism, the mortality of the soul, the absence of metaphysical rewards and punishments, the triumph of clear-eyed reason over the night-birds of superstitious fear – crumbles as Cassius recounts the ominous presages he has witnessed."[17] In Epicurus, Cassius had found the basis for an image of himself as an independent rational consciousness, inured to the effects of superstitious fear. This image is comparable to the humanist idealization of the individual as a self-sufficient plenitude, confident in his own nature, that Althusser sought to critique. Earlier in the play, Cassius had clung to the ideology of containment. In the aftermath of Caesar's assassination, he had proclaimed a narrative in which Caesar's murder would be construed as a great victory for the conspirators, whose participation in the event would henceforth be celebrated and acted over and over again. Now, however, his beliefs are in disarray and his earlier presumption that his own heroism would be celebrated has turned into a morbid

defeatism. Cassius here does not simply display a loss of confidence; he no longer knows what to make of himself or the world around him, because Fate has flagrantly contradicted the ideological assumptions that had previously propped up his self-understanding.

The portents of Fate and the inevitabilty of defeat that they signal inspire a different response from Brutus to that given by Cassius. When Caesar's ghost appears to Brutus – itself proof that, contrary to his prior belief, Caesar's spirit can be separated from the body – it delivers a message that he accepts with pragmatic calm:

> BRUTUS: Why com'st thou?
> GHOST: To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi.
> BRUTUS: Well, then I shall see thee again?
> GHOST: Ay, at Philippi.
> BRUTUS: Why, I will see thee at Philippi then. (4.3.282-86)

Brutus accepts his fate willingly; unlike Cassius, he does not question it or himself. And for the rest of the play, he avoids making bitter disclosures of his own ineffectuality. Indeed, he does not appear in the least to give up the methods dictated by his status as a conspirator, but rather he weaves them into a new model of self-understanding. As Greenblatt observes, Brutus exhibits "a quality of epic self-regard and a capacity to envision himself as the saviour of Rome".[18] He perceives that his own death will restore order to Rome by laying to rest Caesar's Ghost:

> The ghost of Caesar hath appeared to me
> Two several times by night, at Sardis once,
> And this last night, here in Philippi fields.
> I know my hour is come. (5.5.17-20)

Even as he submits himself to death, Brutus persists in the belief that his role is to neutralize the threat of disruption to the Republic. By running on his sword, he believes that he will finally contain the restless spirit of Caesar which he and the other conspirators falsely believed they had tamed in the Capitol: "Caesar, now be still, / I killed not thee with half so good a will" (5.5.50-51). These last words are not as self-effacing as they may first

appear. Insofar as his death serves to contain the spectacle of transgression manifested by the civil war, Brutus can see himself as a victor, staying true to the republican ideology of containment to which he has all along subscribed.

To the end, Brutus continues to live by the ideological principles that produced his commitment to the conspiracy. In *Julius Caesar*, political convictions can denote positive forms of self-expression, they are revealed to be sources of false knowledge and delusion. In this respect, the play shares with Althusser an interest in exposing the institutional structures that circumscribe personal agency and will, by demonstrating how individuals are objects of political ideology and interpellation in part to show how people might stop being susceptible to them. In *Julius Caesar*, no such consciousness-raising is attempted, and it may not even be possible in the formal, ideologically constrained world of Rome. Brutus's political convictions have less to do with the formulation of concrete beliefs about matters of the state than with the appeasement of the individual's desire to qualify endlessly his own self-perceptions. His failure to distinguish between the ideological and actual boundaries of his existence, exemplified by his dogmatic refusal to give up the self-image of republican defender, is an integral feature of his tragic blindness. By extension, the play's status as a tragedy is inextricably tied to its interest in the ramifications of its characters' political commitments.

## Notes

1 In Samuel Johnson, *The Major Works*, ed. Donald Greene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 462.

2 Gary B. Miles, "How Roman are Shakespeare's 'Romans'?", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1989), 279.

3 Edward Pechter, "*Julius Caesar* and *Sejanus*: Roman politics, inner selves and the powers of the theatre", in *Shakespeare and his contemporaries*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 68.

4 Coppélia Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 86.

5 Louis Althusser, "Marxism and Humanism", in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Allen Lane, 1969), p. 227.

6 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore and Irene Gordon (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 121. Burckhardt and Marx were born in the same year, 1818; Althusser was born one century later, in 1918.

7 Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 233.

8 Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 233.

9 Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 234.

10 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 136.

11 Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, p. 152.

12 Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, p. 162.

13 William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. Marvin Spevack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1.1.35-36. All subsequent references to the play are taken from this edition.

14 Gayle Greene, "*The Power of Speech/ To Stir Men's Blood*": The Language of Tragedy in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar", Renaissance Drama* 11 (1980), 75.

15 Sharon O'Dair, "Social role and the making of identity in *Julius Caesar*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 33 (1993), 294.

16 Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare*, p. 103.

17 Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 181.

18 Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, pp. 183-84.

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